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Building meaningful cross-sector partnerships for children and media initiatives: a conversation café with scholars and activists from around the world

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, we bring together academics and activists from around the world in a "conversation café" to share their perspectives on the past, present, and future of children and media with specific emphasis on building meaningful cross-sector partnerships. Key change-agents from academe, nonprofits, and for-profit organizations committed to youth and media literacy from the USA, the UK, Singapore, the Netherlands, Australia, and India participated in this discussion. A unique online conversation café was set up to facilitate discussions over a three-week period. The conversation provides a flavor of the changing media landscape, local-global tensions, industry-academe-nonprofit initiatives, and unique challenges and opportunities relating to building cross-sector partnerships in various cultural contexts. Future directions for scholarship and activism relating to youth media, technology, and arts are discussed.

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Activism; collaboration; media literacy; dialog; engaged scholarship; globalization; children

If we want to bring about significant changes for the greater social good, it is essential to engage multiple partners in the conversation, including media professionals, artists, youth advocates, policymakers, and educators. Some of the most applied, interesting, and cutting-edge projects relating to children and media are happening outside of academe. Yet, there are very few attempts by youth and media scholars to go outside the ivory tower to engage with other sectors such as nonprofits, the media industry, and government. Misperceptions and mutual distrust because of differing timelines, values, and priorities are further fueled by the lack of opportunities to converse (Lemish, 2014). Children's festivals such as Prix Jeunesse, Media Rise, and the World Summit on Media for Children recognize the need for "global exchange, local empowerment, and children's participation, encouraging dialogue between policy-makers, television producers, researchers, and children themselves" (A Guide to International Events in Children's Media's, 2007, p. 93). In this essay, we gather scholars and activists from around the world in a "conversation café" to discuss the past, present, and future of children and media.

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Method

Given the international scope of the *Journal of Children and Media*, the authors designed a conversation among key change-agents from academe, nonprofits, and for-profit organizations committed to youth and media from the USA, the UK, Singapore, the Netherlands, Australia, and India. Building on the design of the roundtable on global children's media flows conducted via email (Chan, Lemish, McMillin, & Parameswaran, 2013), we used a unique online conversation café to facilitate the discussion. A "secret" Facebook group was set up for a three-week period in February 2015. The posts and comments were compiled and edited down for brevity by highlighting insightful and relevant comments. Two drafts of the edited transcript were shared with the participants for feedback. These conversations provided a flavor of the changing media landscape, local–global tensions, and unique challenges in various cultural contexts.

Participants

After receiving IRB approval, purposeful sampling was used to invite 11 prominent stakeholders with experience in successfully collaborating with various sectors, of which eight responded positively.

Gabriel Asheru is co-founder of Guerilla Arts, a for-profit arts education consulting group that serves youth in the Washington, DC area. **Sriram Ayer** is the founder of Nalanda Way, a nonprofit foundation focused on helping marginalized children in India realize their dreams and raise their voices through arts and media. **DeAnna Cummings** is the executive director and co-founder of Juxtaposition Arts (JXTA), a youth-focused cultural development center in Minneapolis that creates opportunities for people, especially racially marginalized youth from lower income backgrounds, to exercise leadership and pursue self-sufficiency through hands-on engagement in the arts.

Sonia Livingstone is a professor in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and has conducted cross-national comparative research on the opportunities and risks afforded by digital and online technologies in collaboration with policy-makers and governmental organizations across Europe. **Kristen Harrison** is a professor of Communication Studies and director of the media psychology group in the Research Center for Group Dynamics, Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. She is co-founder of the STRONG Kids Program, a research initiative engaged with media, marketing, and family predictors of early childhood obesity. **Sun Sun Lim** is an associate professor at the Department of Communications and New Media and Assistant Dean for Research at the National University of Singapore. She recently developed a Social Media Resource Kit for use by counselors, teachers, psychologists, and social workers who work with youth-at-risk. She also serves on Singapore's Media Literacy Council. **Jessica Taylor Piotrowski** is an associate professor in the Amsterdam School of Communication Research at the University of Amsterdam and the director of the Center for research on Children, Adolescents, and the Media (CcaM). Her research on young children's differential susceptibility to media effects, especially digital media, has led to consulting and collaborative projects with media industry. **Terry Flew** is a professor of Media and Communication in Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia. He is a member of the Australian Research Council College

of Experts for Humanities and Creative Arts and has worked with policy-makers to shape new media policies in Australia.

Conversation café

The initial conversations were focused on warm-up questions about participants' background and expertise. Once a good rapport was established, three main topics were discussed: reflections about the past decade, ways of building cross-sector partnerships, and directions for the future.

Ramasubramanian and Yadlin-Segal: Please share your views on some major trends in the last decade relating to children and media that you have observed both locally and globally.

Lim (Singapore): In metropolitan parts of Asia, we have seen a proliferation of personally owned and used portable devices for kids in the home and a growing incorporation of technology in school-based teaching and learning that necessitates corresponding home ownership, usage and management of technology. Entertainment-wise, there is a clear shift away from TV to the Internet and devices that enable access.

Harrison (Ann Arbor, USA): The biggest trend in the last decade is mobile media (phones, tablets, etc.) and the way they have infiltrated children's lives in all physical settings. "Media exposure" used to imply a specific setting: the home television room, the movie theater etc. Now that children can bring media anywhere and access the web while they are at it, we are forced to look beyond the "message" as source of outcome to the ubiquity and constant presence of devices as a primary influence on the quality and tempo of children's lives. As a media psychologist, I come from a tradition of research in which messages were of primary importance. Of course, they are still important, but research on background TV's impact on children's conversations with parents, or on learning to read on a tablet vs. print books or on texting and the tempo of peer conversation points to the centrality of devices themselves in shaping human relationships and child development.

Livingstone (London, UK): I have a methodological trend too. As it becomes ever harder to know when you are actually online or offline, especially for kids, how can we still measure time online? When everyone has all their apps open, how can we measure time spent on social networking sites or on work or chat? Shall we as researchers chuck out time use questions?

Flew (Brisbane, Australia): I think that Sonia [Livingstone] is right that as time spent online/offline blurs, time use surveys become much more problematic. Also, with so many of my colleagues now wearing Fitbits,[1] I think the wearables moment has truly arrived.

Livingstone (London, UK.): Informally, and in a few parenting interviews, I have been trying out the idea of wearables. It seems to me that parents over 40 are horrified. But to younger parents, the reaction seems to be "Thank goodness someone has invented this neat new way of knowing where my kid is" or, more simply, "That's cool." So the new generation of tech-savvy parents may be rethinking ideas of parental mediation, privacy, and surveillance.

Harrison (Ann Arbor, USA): I find this exciting because media use has always been a behavioral variable but not treated as such by the majority of communication researchers, who historically have looked primarily at language and its meaning in estimating "media effects." With children, however, there are three primary ways media can shape their lives: through messages and their encoded meanings, through interaction with the device independent of

messages, and through time displacement of other life activities. I am seeing more research attention paid to the latter two now, and I think that is a tremendous step forward.

Piotrowski (Amsterdam, The Netherlands): I think that we are at a point now in communication science where the most critical change we can make is to move away from direct/universal approaches to more nuanced perspectives on understanding how youth select, process, and respond to media. At CcaM, we often discuss differential susceptibility paradigms—the notion that we need to identify specific characteristics that may influence the process in order to understand which children may be positively or negatively influenced by media content, and importantly *why* this effect occurs. Differential susceptibility comes from a psychological paradigm, but it has clear applications for communication science (see Piotrowski & Valkenburg, 2015 for more information). I believe that this perspective can help us offset negative consequences, bolster positive opportunities, and offer meaningful input in the design of future media technologies.

Flew (Brisbane, Australia): From a policy point of view, one risk is that we identify different attributes to particular media platforms and produce divergent regulatory systems. In Australia in the 1990s, it was accepted that video games were "potentially more harmful" than other media—on an evidence base that was slender at best—and it took almost 20 years to address the subsequent anomalies about how games were regulated vis-à-vis other media. The rise of apps (which were considered a kind of game under the legislation) made addressing this task quite urgent, but policy inertia and particular lobbying cultures kept a ban on adult games in place for a long time, despite gamers collecting over 50,000 signatures calling for policy reform (King & Delfabbro, 2010).

Asheru (Washington, DC, USA): As for major trends from my perspective in a for-profit company, most of our funding comes from directly writing proposals for services to schools, after school programs, youth service organizations, and other nonprofits. This year will be our third summer camp, and the focus will be on activism and how to use your voice and art to impact change, either community-based or globally. The hip-hop diplomacy work I did in Bangladesh last year and even in Costa Rica made me see that there are global cultural connectors at play that didn't have the same (or any) impact before. Things like hip-hop culture, social media, Skype, all make the world smaller and allow you to see things with clearer focus. When the Ferguson protests began,[2] youth in Palestine stood in solidarity with the Black youth in Ferguson, even giving tips on how to deal with pepper spray and rubber bullets, and showing support for them exercising their right to protest.

Ramasubramanian and Yadlin-Segal: Please tell us about your experiences, if any, with working on collaborative projects across sectors or across disciplines. What are the opportunities and benefits of such partnerships? What are the challenges and disadvantages they pose?

Livingstone (London, UK): Such collaborations must be truly dialogic. It doesn't work to sit in the university and say, who can we tell about our results? We have to take the time to work out who really might be interested in what we do. That means going to "their" events, building friendships as well as working arrangements. And being ready to learn as well as tell. This is the point I find colleagues often don't get. There is really much to challenge our thinking and interpretations of problems or findings from discussion with those working in practice.

Piotrowski (Amsterdam, The Netherlands): Collaborative experiences offer us a unique way of stepping outside the so-called ivory tower. In youth and media, we have the opportunity of having a clear industry-based counterpart aligning with our work.

Practically speaking, this means two key activities that I see as particularly valuable. First, I have made it a point to be willing and available to speak at many industry events. I work to distill my research into useable, actionable tips. Then, at these events, I express willingness to consult when feasible. Personally, I have found that many small start-ups simply do not have the money to afford consultation. I offer start-ups the opportunity to receive my consultation services for free or at discounted cost (depending upon scope of project), assuming I retain the rights to publish empirical information from this work. Although these consulting efforts are limited since there are, of course, other pressing tasks at-hand, it is something that I try to do when possible.

Second, I listen. This means attending professional events whenever possible. There is so very much for the industry to share with academics. I find myself inspired from these conversations, and I often have a better idea of what my next research project should be, how my research can be helpful, and I feel it generally helps me better align research with practice.

Flew (Brisbane, Australia): An interesting trend in recent years is the number of cultural researchers who have gone over to industry, at places such as Microsoft Research and the Intel Social Technologies Lab. This is a trend of particular interest "Down Under." I was involved with the Australian Law Reform Commission's review of Australian media classification policies, which are of particular relevance to children and media (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2012). My involvement made me appreciate the need to ensure that less established, less well-resourced, and less vocal stakeholders are engaged in policy debates, and to get input from those who may be suffering "submission fatigue", or a sense that engagement in policy processes is futile. The broader impetus is to shift regulation in these areas from government command-and-control to engagement of relevant industry players in co-regulatory arrangement.

Harrison (Ann Arbor, USA): The STRONG Kids Program at the University of Illinois is hosted by the Family Resilience Center. Everyone associated with the division has a home in another program, and since it is a cells-to-society program, we all studied vastly different things. Every two weeks we would meet to develop a program of research with a single umbrella project (survey of preschoolers) and subprojects relevant to our disciplinary strengths. The interesting challenge was trying to problem-solve and find a common vocabulary across disciplines. After a year or so, we gave up on the search for a common vocabulary and just committed to learning each other's languages. In my experience, these partnerships work best when everyone agrees to respect everyone else's unique disciplinary requirements and incentives instead of trying to impose their own. We had people mapping the retail food environment of participating families' neighborhoods, analyzing saliva samples, interviewing preschoolers themselves (that was my bit), observing family mealtimes, and so on. The absolute joy in the experience, aside from getting to know the other investigators, was seeing how much fascinating research is occurring all around a common problem (in our case, early childhood obesity).

Asheru (Washington, DC, USA): Media companies, school districts, nonprofit and for profit partnerships can all come together, but the drawback of this kind of partnership is that sometimes there can be too many chefs in the kitchen. With budgets and supplies come responsibilities and expected outcomes that may not necessarily be your priority as

a service provider. The preferred partnership is one where the money provider has a trust in what you do as a service provider and allows you the autonomy to "do your thing" within the parameters of what they need to see as outcomes.

Cummings (Minneapolis, USA): To date, through a 10 year partnership with the University of Minnesota called ReMix, we have worked with dozens of community partners (including City of Minneapolis, Cleveland Neighborhood Association, and Common Bond Communities). ReMix connects youth and community members who have limited knowledge of the design field with educational and professional resources to plan and implement people-centric solutions for public art and design to improve public spaces in our low income urban neighborhood.

More than 300 students have undertaken numerous projects that empower young Northside residents to take the role of designers and installers, making real-time visual and functional changes along major thoroughfares: light post banners, pop-up art exhibitions at bus stops, five public murals, and two neighborhood sculpture parks. Projects begin by identifying a focus area and continue through iterations of research, planning, piloting, evaluating, and implementing. In addition to tangible livability improvements already made at the hands of youth and stakeholders, our work has had significant learning outcomes. JXTA ReMix alums have studied design at Parsons School of Design in NYC and University of Wisconsin-Madison. Many UMN ReMix alums have chosen work in community-centered design firms and nonprofits, as well as major local design/planning firms, and have created policy that paved the way for farmers markets, improved transit and deeper engagement on the Northside of our city.

Lim (Singapore): One important lesson I learnt from my collaborations with policy makers and youth workers is that one must cultivate strong relationships with people on the ground who can be advocates for your initiatives. Academics may sometimes be perceived as being out of touch and in the ivory tower, despite our best efforts to come across otherwise. But when you foster strong partnerships, you can benefit from reliable on-the-ground opinions and perspectives, thereby ensuring that your proposals are well-informed and speak to the concrete needs of stakeholders.

Ayer (Chennai, India): At Nalanda Way, we help children and youth research issues that affect them and express their views through radio and films. These productions have had significant impact in helping decision-makers understand the problems faced by marginalized children and have also resulted in changed behavior among perpetrators. They have dealt with issues of child labor, child trafficking, malnutrition, health, etc. These products have also been used as tools for advocacy and campaigns by other nonprofits and government agencies.

Ramasubramanian and Yadlin-Segal: Where do you see the future of children and media heading? What should be the key priorities? What kind of partnerships and projects do you see in this future?

Piotrowski (Amsterdam, The Netherlands): I believe that the future of youth and media studies lies in identifying future media moral panics. For decades, each new medium that has entered the lives of children has been met with a moral panic from families and public policy-makers. Research has shown that while some of these concerns have been warranted, there are also many opportunities for media to benefit youth. As researchers, it is critical that we not only respond quickly to the current moral panic associated with the digital millennium, but also that we prepare ourselves for the next moral panic. We need to be more

forward-thinking in identifying relevant topics that may result in moral panics. And we need to carefully reflect on whether our theories of old media require reconceptualization and adaptation. For example, many theories do not suggest universal media effects and yet our applications of these theories often would suggest otherwise.

Livingstone (London, UK): In the past week, I have seen media coverage about kids chatting with a responsive Barbie, wearables of all kinds, domestic drones, parental relief at tracking kids, big data, endemic branding, selfie culture, and more. So yes, I agree with Jessica [Piotroswki] about the problem of repeated moral panics. But I cannot quite join the "nothing's new under the sun" camp either. So how can we resolve this? One way is to think about how society's embrace of (and design of) digital media is reconfiguring the media literacy demands on children (as media become more embedded, opaque and commercialized). Another is to think about whether the meaning of our key concepts is changing for research and for children. On my mind are topics such as privacy, identity(ies), monitoring/surveillance, conversation, and intimacy. Another is taking seriously the notion of media generations (as Jordan (2015) did in her ICA plenary). We are used to defining generational change in terms of age-at-first-child i.e. around 25–30 years. I see no reason for this to continue. In cultural terms, we have several distinct generations of both parents and children, depending on the media that held sway in their youth. Most important in terms of partnerships, I suggest it is time for a major refocusing—away from (or in addition to) the specialized work on children/media to a mainstreamed recognition that we live in a thoroughly mediated world among any and every one project or initiative concerned with children. I do not know what it means anymore to understand a policy or practice with children that doesn't include a media angle, and it blows my mind that many in the wider world consider this still plausible.

Harrison (Ann Arbor, USA): This one is difficult to answer because we are so susceptible to the fallacy of a constant slope (e.g. "at this rate, everyone will have Ebola by 2020"). The future will be led by developments in technology, and we don't yet know what those will be. However, the big picture of the field's history has been one of a sustained spotlight on media CONTENT and its impact on developing children, to the exclusion of work (some of which has fortunately managed to get published anyway) on media's role in structuring children's lives both spatially and temporally, and media's role in displacing other activities considered (perhaps erroneously) essential for development. The ubiquity of mobile media has increased recognition for the need for more research in the latter two areas, and I predict this will continue or even increase in the future. For instance, children-and-media researchers have often criticized time spent with television as a poor research measure. This critique is valid if time is intended as a measure of exposure to a particular type of content—but time as a measure of time itself has merit. If we consider time spent with media to be a key element of 24-h behavior cycles, then aggregate time is only the tip of the iceberg. Daytime media use may have different ramifications from nighttime media use given what is displaced (e.g. sleep), what is viewed (e.g. adult content), what is built (e.g. relationships through unsupervised texting), and so on. In addition to time, I imagine there will be increased research attention to the different roles played by media in different childhood settings: school, home, community, etc. I also expect developments in research on children and media to parallel developments in other behavioral domains, especially the recent trend toward merging social and biological measures to gain a cells-to-society understanding of human-technology interaction through the life course.

Asheru (Washington, DC, USA): I think in the future it will be revealed that the current media are/were used as a form of mind control. It will be more important than ever for us to monitor what our children are listening to and watching, and their social media habits. The key is going to continue to be critical analysis and literacy. Digital, media, cultural, environmental literacy. Text type and other forms of shorthand will not be a formally accepted form of communication. So while we are encouraging youth to use these tools, we must be vigilant in providing the context and the "teachable moments" of media content when we engage youth, whether it is in the classroom or at home on the couch in front of the TV.

Lim (Singapore): There will need to be a heightened focus on multi-modal literacy because media assume myriad genre-defying forms and that variety is only growing. So how do we ensure that young people are equally adept at critically consuming media in its different guises? That will be an increasingly important challenge for researchers, educators, parents and policy makers.

Concluding remarks

The participants in this conversation café agreed that there is a need to systematically engage in conversations in online and offline contexts with those committed to youth and media initiatives from a variety of sectors such as industry, academe, nonprofits, and policy-makers. Beyond physical and virtual spaces, there should be greater openness for cross-sector partnerships, transnational collaborations, and multidisciplinary initiatives relating to youth advocacy, media activism, and critical media literacy. In the next decade, new methods, theories, and measures will be developed to better understand the social and behavioral implications of the ever-changing media formats, messages, and contexts. In this media-saturated environment, it is imperative that policies related to children consider the media angle. Rapid changes in the media landscape means that access to technology and multimodal literacy will continue to be adapted in uneven ways within and across communities. Therefore, collaborative community-oriented initiatives using art, media, and technology are crucial for development of youth, especially from under-resourced groups, into active citizen-critics.

Notes

1. FitBit is an American-based company that manufactures an activity or fitness trackers carrying the same name. The product is designed in the form of a wireless-enabled wearable device (such as watch), and is used to measure personal health and physical activity metrics such as steps, sleep routine, etc.
2. The Ferguson protests are a series of race-related protests and social acts that began following the deadly shooting of Michael Brown, an 18-year-old African-American male, by a white police officer on August 9, 2014, in Ferguson, Missouri.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Srividya Ramasubramanian is an associate dean of Liberal Arts and an associate professor of Communication at Texas A&M University. She is also co-founder and executive director of Media Rise (www.mediarisenow.org), a nonprofit global alliance for educators, media professionals, artists, and community leaders committed to promoting meaningful media. Her interests are in media literacy, cultural diversity, and prejudice reduction.

Aya Yadlin-Segal is a PhD candidate in the Department of Communication at Texas A&M University. Her research interests include identity construction in online environments, the representations of "Others" in mass media, cultural flows across globalized mediascapes, and Israel-Iran relations.

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